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ABSTRACT

Many notions can be incorporated into the foreign language commercial course to explain and complement its intrinsic technical content. A course in commercial French was developed at the College of Charleston (South Carolina) in response to the foreign language instruction opportunities and potential graduate employment opportunities provided by the growth of international industry in South Carolina. The course augmented the basic language skills and vocabulary of business practice with the study of French geography and its relationship to the infrastructure of the French economy, including agriculture, transportation, trade, and industry. The course also included study of the Common Market and its history, attitudes held by different segments of the economy, the relationship of social history to economic development, and the personality of the French people that Americans are likely to encounter in business. Such a course must be carefully planned and monitored so that it is not overwhelming. Its complexity depends on the preparedness and enthusiasm of the class, but it can be a valid addition and a valuable asset to a foreign language program. (MSE)

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THE COMMERCIAL FRENCH COURSE:

AN ADDED ASSET IN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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The Commercial French Course: An Added Asset in Language Acquisition

Since its inception and until the late sixties, the teaching of languages in the United States was exclusively the traditional instruction in grammar and literature. The results obtained were so much the more dismal that the majority of American students started learning a foreign tongue at an age when inhibition often prevented spontaneity and enthusiasm. Moreover, as years passed, the students' knowledge of English grammar, syntax, and vocabulary diminished and further hindered progress. After several years of instruction in high school and in college, a minority of students could read a few lines in foreign newspapers and magazines, and exchange banal greetings in another tongue; most had forgotten everything they had learned.

The late sixties brought forth a veritable revolution with the introduction of the total audio-visual method, initiated by the Armed Forces during World War II. Radical changes are bad because they condone extremism and do not allow compromise. The results of the exclusive audio-visual approach which eradicated the study of grammar, syntax, literature, and civilization-in the context of history and humanism-were much worse than those of the previous traditional instruction. The students were programmed to repeat ready-made sentences without comprehending their structures and the basic rules of correct usage. The parallel learning of English grammar and syntax, and the enrichment of English vocabulary, which the traditional method

had fostered also disappeared. In all institutions of higher learning two hostile camps confronted each other: the proponents of the innovating audio-visual system against the traditionalists. That state of affair did little to awake a new interest in foreign language learning. Across the United States, many colleges and universities dropped their language requirements; that trend becoming more visible as business administration departments and their enrollments continued to prosper.

What was needed was a whole inclusive approach to foreign language learning, and practical motivation. Basics were necessary to read, write, and speak correct French, German, or any other tongue. The oral approach was to be more than responding to expected questions and exchanging usual greetings. Students of languages needed to develop and partake in spontaneous dialogues. The Americans had isolated themselves too long, and the knowledge of other languages and cultures had become indispensable to help the ailing economy, the falling export business, and the enmity met by Americans abroad.

Those conclusions were underscored by the report from President Carter's Committee on Foreign Languages. Its message furnished in great part the needed impetus and incentives which had been needed. Young people who knew different languages would be the agents of a free international exchange of ideas and would find enviable positions and financial rewards. Those were magic words for American college students whose primordial worry was to find their niche among the ranks of employed and tacit promises of advancement and success.

For years I had been a "traditional" teacher, delighting in literary critique and analysis; but I had always regretted that a small percentage of the thousands of students required to satisfy four semesters of foreign language instruction at the College of Charleston, continued advanced studies

in French. In the early eighties, I realized that economic developments in South Carolina could offer a quasi-miraculous opportunity to reverse the regressive trend taken by languages, and change college students' apathy toward them into enthusiasm.

Given its stable, conservative business ambience, the availability of comparatively less-expensive land, the climate which allows year-round production, and the favorable tax situation, South Carolina had become a prime development ground for a broad range of foreign industries. In addition to those favorable factors, Charleston offered its deep-water port with car loading facilities; the presence of a skilled work force and abundance of labor; the promise of a large amount of energy and prices manageable for long-term use; the availability of more than 5,000 acres of land; the satisfactory transportation factor with ninety-six trucking lines, two competitive rail companies, and a well kept interstate highway. Today, "South Carolina ranks third in the nation in foreign industrial investments, according to figures released by the U.S. Department of Commerce. France and French-speaking countries (Switzerland, Belgium, and Luxembourg), Germany, Great Britain, and Japan have investments totaling $4.) billions in South Carolina."[1]

In January 1982, I initiated contact with various French and French-speaking firms in South Carolina. Their domains lie chiefly in the manufacturing of textiles, tires, paper and printing, chemicals and metal products. I also spoke with professors in the thriving Business Administration Department at my institution, and encouraged my students and advisees in a double-major in French and business administration. In the Spring of 1983, I suggested to the College of Charleston Languages Department the addition to its curriculum of French 331: Commercial French. The

proposition was accepted.

I must admit that I approached the task of teaching the new course, in the Fall of 1984, with avowed trepidations.

Reflection indicated that careful planning was imperative. Again, I spoke with the Michelin tire firms, the Alumnax Company, the Jamestown and Goose Creek French textile firms, and other French-speaking companies in South Carolina. The responses to my inquiries were unanimous: Rewarding professional opportunities were available for college graduates with a solid background in French and business administration. By solid background in French, they meant not only the knowledge of the technical vernacular and of all the notions germane to French commerce, but also and primarily, the ability to speak and write correct French. In addition, preference would be given to applicants who knew French culture, because those individuals would not have to be sent to France for cultural acquisitions at their employers' expenses.

Complementary data were obtained from former students doing graduate work for the obtention of a Master's Degree in international business. I wanted to know what had proven to be the most valuable assets, as well as the hindering lacunae in their undergraduate French background, and what recommendations they would advance to update my teaching methods and improve the College of Charleston French curriculum. The methodology I follow stressing grammar, syntax, sentence construction, and a parallel approach of French and English with insistance on translation from English to French was given total approval and credited for the success my students were having in their advanced studies. I was also encouraged to continue to stress oral/aural practice along with written expression; and to emphasize the inseparable notions of geography, history, literature, and culture in all my

classes. A most useful source of information was the University of South Carolina at Columbia which offers an M.I.B.S. graduate degree and ranked second in the nation in June 1984, according to the Charleston Business Review.[2] The same source indicated that the universities of New York, Columbia, Harvard, Michigan, Indiana, Wharton, M.I.T., and Stanford have similar programs which combine areas studies, business, and foreign languages; their curricula emphasize analytical problem-solving in a business environment, foreign language proficiency, cultural sensitivity, and overseas work experience. The M.I.B.S. program at U.S.C offers French, German, Arabic, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, and English for foreign nationals. The two-year program includes an internship of six-months or more with a company abroad.

The data thus obtained indicated so many requesites for the new course that my prime concern was to fit all the essentials within the planned one-semester course. Recommendations have been made for the course to extend to two semesters in the future.

The choice of a satisfactory textbook was time-consuming and rather frustrating. Major college textbook publishers in the United States have offerings in the field of commercial languages. Contents vary greatly, and one must apply practical judgement in discerning the basic and essential notions from the more specialized ones. The fact that I was a novice myself in that innovative specialization helped me considerably in determining which texts explained new notions concisely and clearly, and which ones pointed out the particularities of the French rules vis-a-vis the American practices. I was most grateful to discover that several textbooks included well-comprised grammatical and syntactical reviews; but I had assumed rightly that special handouts on French culture would have to supplement textbook content.

Since time was a primordial consideration, the grammatical and syntactical reviews had to be presented in a compact form and to be included, for better retention, within sentences and paragraphs. To save time and increase effectiveness, the chosen vocabulary concentrated on basic words, current idiomatic expressions, and the specialized vocabulary relevant to each chapter. Useful types of applied exercises included dictations, letter writing, written and oral reports, and translations from English into French. The latter practice was emphasized for its usefulness in comparing the differences between the English and the French commercial terminologies and practices. Furthermore, samples of testing obtained from diverse French commercial schools, such as the Ecole Supérieure de Commerce de Paris and the Ecole Supérieure de Commerce de Lyon indicated that translation represented as much as 60% of the total test.

It was most rewarding to witness the students' positive attitudes toward grammatical and syntactical usages in practical situations. The reticence and impatience I had observed during the correction of papers on Corneille or Baudelaire were replaced by attention and willingness when the composition of curricula vitae and letters to prospective French employers or clients was in progress.

My experience in the classroom had taught me that the majority of American students were ignorant of geography. The acquisiton of wall maps of physical and political France was essential. Those maps were displayed at every session of the commercial course. Soon, the intricate river system of France, the repartition of plains, rocky reliefs, and mountains, as well as the situation and character of her boundaries were solidly anchored notions. I chose some excellent excerpts by selected French writers, such as André Siegfried, to emphasize the impact that the physical geography of the country

and its situation in the northern hemisphere had on all aspects of the French life and culture. The concepts of longitude, latitude, and altitude, as well as the continental or coastal factor were studied as additional determinants of the climate, the economy, and the mores of any region.

I showed my students that by looking at the configuration of a river, one could deduce if the territory through which it flows would be served by its navigability or its swiftness. The curvatures of the Seine explained why Paris, although remote from the Atlantic coast, is a great commercial harbor and features a ship as the central figure of its coat of arms; while the Rhône, the Rhine, the Garonne, and their confluents, rushing from their sources and digging gorges along most of their courses, present serious navigation problems, but are invaluable as sources of hydroelectricity favorable to industries.

The multiplicity of the French alluvial plains in a temperate climate determined why France has always been an agricultural country with crops still cultivated on 80% of its modern territory. The importance of the agriculture also showed why, in spite of its 3,000 coastal kms., the French fishing industry is not prevailing.

A good physical map indicates geologic structure, thus permitting speculation as to the kinds of crops thriving in a region. Whereas the low and rich lands of the North and West of France furnish the basic alimentary staples: wheat, cattle, and dairy products; the accidented relief of the South and East is propitious to polyculture: fruits, vegetables, vineyards.

The humid caves carved in the permeable soil of the Causses host the Roquefort cheese; the chalky soil of Champagne, undermined by rain and streams, offers its meager vegetation to sheep, while the small white grapes, high in sugar content, cultivated there, produce the famous bubbly wine. The strategic situation or

the bustling economy of certain areas determined the existence of important cities which students learned to identify.

Thus, as they understood and discussed the infrastructure of French economy: agriculture, industry, trade, and transportation, students developed solid notions of physical and economic geography which are applicable to any country in the world. Such notions are most necessary as studies in the commercial French course must comprise the operations of the European Economic Community which includes West Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, Holland, Italy, Great Britain, Ireland, Denmark, and Greece. The problems of the Common Market are France's problems, of course. They include the questions about the European monetary system which influences the fluctuations of the change; the disaccord about Euratom; the need for France to modernize her agricultural equipment.

Inevitably, the study of the Common Market had to include historical notions which the present generation of students tends to ignore. The new closeness of France and West Germany appeared miraculous as a lecture presented the birth and the development of the Franco-Germanic conflict through the centuries. Similarly, the entente with Great Britain and Belgium brought echoes from the far-away past, when these two countries were the sworn enemies of France. History should always be present, as modern France is studied, for one must regress into the past to understand and analyze the assets and the problems of the French contemporary economy. As Sanche de Gramont writes: "The past is a lesson to be learned and a legacy to draw from. France is atavistic in the sense that the same diseases tend to recur after a lapse of several generations."[4]

A whole vocabulary from "corporatisme" to "ouvrierisme"; a whole series of attitudes such as that of the peasant toward his land, and of the

"patronat" vis-a-vis the labor force; a whole ensemble of structural situations (disparities between regions, configuration of French towns), find their origins in a past, sometimes quite remote. Thus should be explained how the essentially-agricultural Feudal ages, because of their iniquities, promoted a state of economic equilibrium, placed under the tutelage of the Catholic Church and protected from the upheavals of modern capitalism by a corporatism refractory to social agitation; how absolute monarchy, installed as early as kings François I and Henri II, and reaching its apogée under Louis XIV and his minister Colbert, made of the king the first capitalist who filled the public treasury through taxes. It was also the king's administration that was behind the model farms, the botanical gardens, the mines, and the large manufactures. But the coherence of centralism directed toward progress in all endeavors undertaken by the monarchy, ignored the misery of the peasantry; the whole system collapsed when bad crops prevented the peasants from paying taxes.

The social iniquities pointed out by the eighteenth century philosophers brought forth the Revolution of 1789 whose causes were economic and political. The birth of the affluent bourgeoisie combined with the discovery of new industrial and agricultural methods was to foster the economic impetus of the ninetheenth century. Students need a rapid but concise study of the economic stagnation of the Third Republic which led to demographic, economic, and political immobility; of the great upheavals of the Second World War, followed by the planification and the nationalizations of the Fourth Republic, and the revolutionary concepts of the European Economic Community of the Fifth Republic.

That background also explains, in great part, the personality of the French people which must be known by American students planning to entertain any kind of inter-exchange with French representatives. Above all, the

students should be reminded to be weary of sterotypes, all too often inaccurate or erroneous. The images of the short, mustached and dark Frenchman, wearing a béret or a chef's hat; of the bubbly, fragile, and seductive French woman in a basic-black dress, must be dispelled. The vision of France as a melting pot, not unlike the United States, presenting various types in various regions, must be affirmed.

The French collective soul cannot be accurately described by Julius Ceasar's portrait of the Gauls as quick-tempered and independent, foolhardy and defiant, intelligent and intellectually-curious. More perceptively, students should be given examples of the "esprit français" which is a national idiosyncrasy comprising the emotional type: nervous, mocking, bantering; and the non-emotional individual: sociable and charming. The graphic humor which has recourse to the imaginative, the unusual, the unexpected, the absurd, or the poetic is well representative of Frenchness. A perceptive lecture on a number of traits which differentiate a Frenchman from other nationals should include the citations of typical proverbs; draw attention to representative symbols such as Chantecler, Marianne, and the Michelin-tire man; underscore the importance of discussions and politics, as well as handshaking, table manners , and gastronomy; and emphasize the total absorption of national culture in French people of all milieux, from the recitation of La Fontaine's fables to the visits of Versailles. To cite Sanche de Gramont: "The Frenchman is not someone who possesses a navy blue passport and speaks the language of Descartes, but someone who knows who broke the Soissons vase, what happened to Buridan's donkey, why Parmentier gave his name to a hash, and why Charles Martel saved Christendom."[4]

Indeed, a multitude of notions can be incorporated in the foreign language commercial course to explain and complement its intrinsic technical

content. It must be carefully planned and constantly monitored so that it will become neither indigestible nor awesome. Its complexity must depend on the level of preparedness, astuteness, and enthusiasm of any given class, and its success is commensurable with the time allocated to its teaching; but, conclusively, its curricular addition is not a rupture from the solid traditional language teaching; on the contrary, it should prove to be a valid addition and a valuable asset to any language program which it endows with new life and vigor.

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